

# Extension Update

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## **Proper Handling of Game Meat will Lower Risk of Foodborne Illness**

Hunting season is upon us. Hunters should follow safety precautions to lower their risk of foodborne illness. Proper handling of game meat helps stop bacterial growth on raw meat.

Temperature plays an important role in game meat quality and food safety. Cool the carcass quickly to retain flavor and maintain the quality of the wild game. A temperature above 40 degrees F. is meat's worst enemy.

Bacteria grow most rapidly between 40 degrees and 140 degrees F. If the outside temperature is over 40 degrees F., it is strongly recommended to take the carcass to a cooler the day of the kill.

Special care should be taken to keep the carcass cool during transport. Keep the meat out of direct sunlight and allow as much air circulation as possible. Do not use airtight game bags or tarps that hold in heat and cause meat to spoil rapidly.

Make sure game meat is processed safely in sanitary conditions. If the raw meat is mishandled, bacteria may grow and produce toxins that can cause foodborne illness.

Freeze the fresh meat while it is fresh and in top condition. Freeze at 0 degrees F. or lower to stop bacterial growth.

Divide meat into meal-size quantities and wrap in moisture and vapor-proof wrap to prevent freezer burn. Label packages with contents and date. Freeze only the amount of meat that will be solidly frozen within 24 hours.

Avoid long storage periods in the freezer. Limit seasoned or cured game to four months and frozen storage fresh game to eight months in the freezer. Frozen food storage length is a question of food quality rather than food safety. Storing food in the freezer at 0 degrees F. causes microbes, such as bacteria, mold, and yeast already present in food to become inactive indefinitely. Loss of quality includes changes in taste, texture, moisture content, color, and aroma.

Safely thaw frozen meat in the refrigerator or microwave. Use meat thawed in the refrigerator within one to two days. Meat thawed in the microwave should be cooked immediately.

Game meat often is high in bacterial content and thawing at room temperature will increase bacterial growth.

Keep raw meat and cooked meat separate to avoid cross-contamination. Wash knife, cutting board, and hands often with warm, soapy water.

To destroy bacteria, game needs to be cooked to the appropriate safe internal temperature. Using a thermometer is the only reliable way to ensure safety and to determine the “doneness” of meat and poultry.

Cook all ground meats to an internal temperature of 165 degrees F. Steaks and roasts cooked to an internal temperature of 145 degrees F. are medium rare, 160 degrees F. are medium, and 170 degrees F. are well done. A whole game bird should reach 165 degrees F.

When cooking game, the oven should be set to a temperature of no lower than 325 degrees F.

Follow these guidelines and you will enjoy eating your game meat as much as you did hunting it.

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